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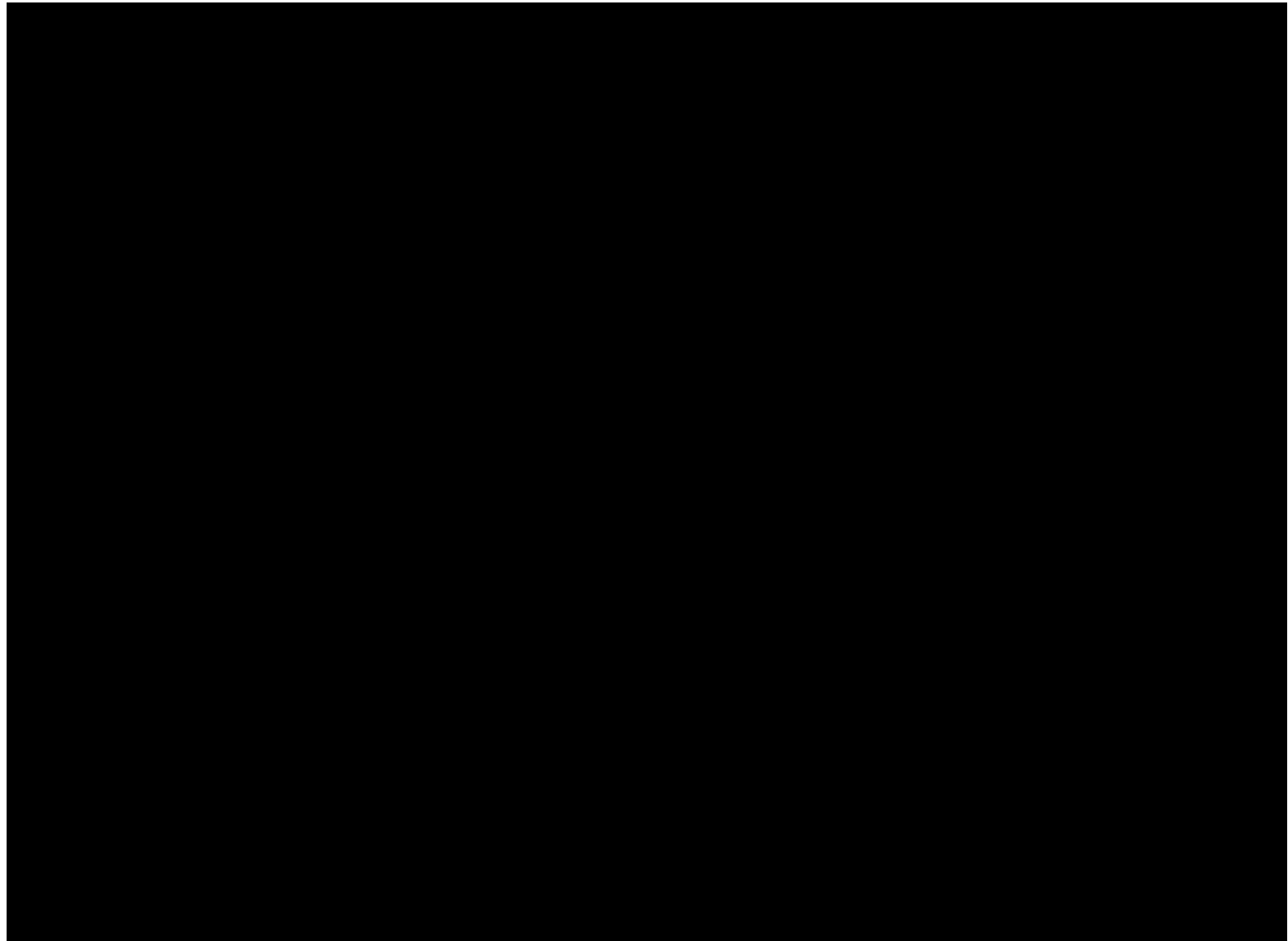
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Alone But Not Lonesome

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Not to get all tragic, but when I go out, I go out alone.
It happens to be the way I roll these days.

I dine alone. I go to movies alone. I attend the theater alone. Table for one. A single ticket. Just one ice cream cone.

I am fine with this. It’s Milwaukee that seems to have a problem.

I have practiced my aberrant lifestyle in New York, in London, in Switzerland, and along the decidedly un-cosmopolitan north shore of Minnesota. Never have I been as challenged and pitied as I have been since I moved to Milwaukee.

When I and my latest Nora Roberts novel crave lobster, the maître d’ looks past my shoulder at the lack of

anyone standing next to me and frowns. “Only one?” he asks, with the sort of attitude you might employ when inquiring if the guy on the bus who just sneezed on you has bubonic plague.

When I am bold enough to go see a film à un, the teenager behind the counter peers over as though I might be dating a toddler lurking down near my knees. “You’re it?” she asks. “I’m it!” I say jauntily. She rolls her eyes, snaps her gum and hands me one ticket reluctantly, as if a single person hasn’t earned the right to sit in the dark alone.

When I go to the opera, which I love, I make an occasion of it. I dress up because it gives me pleasure – not because a man paid for the tickets and likes to see 3-inch heels. I take myself out to dinner first, and am usually seated at the saddest table in the joint, near the kitchen or restroom or a draft from the door. Sometimes, a waitress or waiter adopts me and provides cheerful, friendly service (probably imagining some calamitous catastrophe has sent me out to the Third Ward dateless). But often, my server is grumpy from the start, assuming a woman alone cannot do the math to add 20 percent.

At the theater, the usher takes my ticket. I wait a beat. She waits a beat. I raise an eyebrow. She raises an eyebrow. I hold out my hand for the stub. She keeps it. “And the rest of your party...?” Her voice rises like steam from a kettle. “I’m the party.” She cants her head with compassion. Her voice drops to a Darth Vader register. “All alone?” she slowly intones, as if this is akin to being adrift at sea among sharks in a raft that’s rapidly deflating.

Through the doors, the second and aged usher hands me two programs, forcing me to hand one back. “Ah, flying solo tonight,” he says, as if he has just been told I’ll be dead of smallpox within hours. “Me and Lindbergh,” I joke, like a plucky girl who can cope with being out in public without a fellow, or a girlfriend, or a note from my mother.

I take my seat and look out over the audience. They seem nice, and I like people, I do. I don’t buy a ticket for one because I am a raging misanthrope. There are benefits that traveling in pairs won’t give you. Sitting alone in concert halls, theaters and airplanes, a person appears approachable. I’ve had many a fascinating conversation with a stranger, some of whom have become friends.

Alone is what all the television heroes and heroines are just before something really interesting happens to them. Alone, I can order French food and attend German opera and must justify or defend neither. Alone, I cheerfully eavesdrop on everyone else’s discussions of the merits of the play and am spared a tense ride home with a partner who just doesn’t get Ibsen. Alone, I can ponder what the playwright or the painter or the composer is telling me, free of interruption. Alone, I can hear myself think.

True, going it alone, I miss camaraderie and insights and exposure to the preferences of another human being. But trust me, I get plenty of that in life – I have children. And I do things with friends; there’s a place for that. But there’s a place for being alone in a crowd, too. It’s a singular joy that nourishes the soul.

A crowd of strangers is good company. In my head, I am not as alone as I look.

After the curtain, the usher reappears and, in a sweet and courtly gesture, helps me with my coat. I thank him, and he dips his head toward me conspiratorially. “Maybe next time you can bring a friend,” he whispers.

Maybe next time.

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